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ABSTRACT

An action research project was undertaken to understand how the Writing Laboratory at Reading Area Community College (RACC) defines and accomplishes its work, what faculty and students expect of the lab, and how they make use of it. The investigation sought to foster discussion and reflection on the appropriate role and staffing of a college writing center; initiate and nurture dialogue between college faculty and writing lab staff; identify and articulate problems relating to RACC's writing lab; and initiate a process and outline a strategy to address identified problems. Separate surveys were developed and distributed to 30 full-time and 40 part-time instructors, a sample of 80 RACC students, and all individuals using the lab. The results from the surveys, based on responses from 29 faculty members, 69 students, and 15 lab users, included the following: (1) the task of the writing lab was not articulated; (2) work roles and responsibilities often went undefined; (3) the referral process was unclear; (4) teachers did not seem to refer students in any consistent way; and (5) the lab was organizationally isolated from direct contact with students and faculty. The study report includes recommendations for addressing the problems revealed by the investigation, and the survey instruments. (EJV)

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TITLE III
CURRICULUM ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY
FACULTY DEVELOPMENT
PROJECT REPORT

"An Action Research Proposal: Identifying and Addressing Problems Related to RACC's Writing Laboratory."

PSP

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAM

READING AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SEPTEMBER, 1985

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THE READING AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE
FACULTY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT FINAL REPORT

An Action Research Proposal: Identifying and Addressing Problems Related to RACC's Writing Laboratory

Conducted
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Submitted for Use
by the College Community
on
September 16, 1985

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was provided through a Strengthening Program Grant
(Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965)

Preface

Since its inception in 1979 as an arm of the Developmental Studies Program, the Writing Laboratory at Reading Area Community College has undergone many changes in its philosophy, policies, and staffing. The purpose of this project was not to record or examine those changes; rather, it has been to study and describe the lab as it currently functions within the college--to say what is. More specifically, we hoped to understand how the lab defines and accomplishes its work, what faculty and students expect of the lab, and how they make use of it.

Rationale

While the presence of writing labs or writing centers has become the norm in many two-year and four-year colleges, their functions and their success with students have varied greatly and have been the subject of much professional concern among college composition instructors. At RACC, many teachers, staff, and students have viewed Writing Lab instruction as important for students' success with college writing tasks. Yet, a number of indicators have suggested problems related to faculty and student use of this important service. The specific sparks that kindled our study are these:

1. Data cited in the Reading Area Community College Basic Skills Program Review, April 1984, indicated that the Writing Lab ranked second of the four DSP Basic Skills Labs, with respect to the number of students served (103). However, the Writing Lab ranked last in total number of contacts (2,651). The authors of this report conclude, "That suggests about three visits for each student, which could mean the lab does not invite return visits or

the lab succeeds in making students independent of its services. The data are ambiguous." (p. 34)

2. Institutional Recommendation Number 12 in the same Program Review (p. 46) cites the need for clear guidelines for helping student writers and for discussion between the Humanities Faculty and Writing Lab staff to eliminate the constraint of helping students just in the revision of graded papers.
3. The brief description of the Writing Lab in Appendix E of the Program Review clearly outlines functions that could support instruction in curricular areas beyond the humanities (p. 66). Yet there exists no communication structure within the college whereby business instructors or psychology instructors or biology instructors might influence and direct the content of lab instruction or inform the lab staff of the conventions of academic writing in their individual fields. Indeed, there is no telephone in the lab itself, so contact between teachers and staff has to be face-to-face or in writing--both of which are inefficient in relation to the task.
4. A review of Humanities Division goals for 1984-85 indicated that each member independently listed closer articulation between their division and the Writing Lab as an important goal for the year.
5. Reports over the past three years from our own students that they did not receive the needed or expected help from the Writing Lab encouraged us to engage other students, teachers, and the lab staff in informal discussions of the lab and its functions. These discussions revealed mixed feelings about the lab. Some students thought it a valuable resource; others thought of it as a place of punishment. Among teachers and counselors, there was a vague

quality to discussion: When should students be referred? Wasn't the lab only for students in English courses? Lab staff members expressed a mixture of pleasure in their work and frustration with attempts to address the often conflicting expectations of teachers and students.

The questions regarding the Writing Lab raised by the Basic Skills Program Review coalesced with concerns about the lab already in our own thinking. We had little data on which to base our own referrals to the lab or to encourage students' use of it. We were frustrated with this confused state of affairs and felt that if the students with whom we had contact suffered from the confusion, so must a number of others at the college.

Thus, the current project was conceived to distill and clarify these cloudy waters--to assess the institutional role of the Writing Lab and to define whatever impediments existed to its instructional function at the college.

Specifically, we anticipated these benefits:

1. More effective and consistent support for students who seek help with academic writing tasks.
2. Improved cooperation and communication between referring faculty and Writing Lab staff.
3. Ultimately, more successful students, a factor affecting retention rates at the college.
4. Recognition by other professionals in higher education for supporting an innovative approach to organizational change: internally managed action research.
5. Improved articulation between writing courses due to increased clarity about the role of the Writing Lab in the college's overall writing curriculum.

Scope and Methodology of the Project

To generate and organize information relevant to the Writing Lab, we proposed a research process that would precede any intervention. The research process we chose is known in the Social Sciences as "Action Research." Like more traditional research methods, this one emphasizes the thorough collection and analysis of data around a specified problem or question. Unlike other models of research, however, action research is designed to resolve a particular problem. In the case of this project, it would be used to identify problems interfering with the effectiveness of the Writing Lab and to return information about these problems to the project participants.

One major assumption of Action Research is that research subjects are the most valid source of data about themselves and that returning that data to them--synthesized and organized by the researcher--reveals to those subjects a "hidden reality" that prepares them first for planning and effecting change in the setting and then evaluating the results. This process is a way of using scientific methods of data collection and analysis to guide actions in a social setting.

A complete action research cycle would also include planning and implementing solutions, intervention itself, and evaluating the results of the intervention. However, this project was confined to the first two steps of the process: data collection to identify current problems relating to the Writing Lab and feedback of data to project participants. To accomplish the data collection phase of the project, we obtained information from three sources:

1. The Writing Lab itself--a description and analysis of its current operating philosophy, functions and structure, staff concerns and morale, and student usage patterns. This information was gathered by observation, staff interviews, and from DSP documents.

2. Students

   a) We surveyed a sample of all RACC students enrolled in credit courses during the spring 1985 term. The sample was randomly selected by computer and representative of all academic programs, levels, and ages of RACC students. Full-time and part-time, day and evening students were represented as well. Of this sample we contacted 80 students, 69 of whom completed a questionnaire about the extent of their college writing and their perceptions of the Writing Lab. (See Appendix A for sample questionnaire.) Of those 69 contacted, 25 students agreed to a follow-up interview. We interviewed 17 students.

   b) We placed a brief student evaluation form in the Writing Lab and asked the lab staff to have students complete one after each visit. This in-lab survey was in response to the expressed wish of staff members for direct feedback from students about their work. The three staff members employed in March participated in the creation of this instrument.

3. Faculty

   We distributed a questionnaire to 30 full-time and 40 part-time faculty members with a return of 23 (77%) from full-time and 6 (13%) from part-time teachers. The aim of this questionnaire was to tap teachers' current awareness and expectations of the Writing Lab and to determine stated referral policies and usage patterns by academic division.

To guide this data collection and to organize our thinking we operated with two assumptions from which we developed working hypotheses: The first assumption was that whatever attitude people have toward the Writing Lab, its existence is firmly woven into the organizational fabric of the college. The lab is one of a number of services provided by the Developmental Studies Program (DSP). It has a staff of four part-time employees who are supervised by the Tutor Coordinator, who, in turn, is supervised by the DSP Coordinator. The DSP, designed to provide academic support to students who are under-prepared for the demands of traditional college courses, is considered an arm of the Learning Resource Center and is supervised by its director. This director is responsible to the Vice-President of Academic Affairs, who is the administrative link to the college's faculty.

However, it is the faculty members who are in most direct contact with the students to be served by the lab and who define the extent and purposes of writing in the academic community. The "This is the House that Jack Built" quality of these organizational relationships seems guaranteed to lose the uninitiated--students, adjuncts, new staff-- after two steps. We hypothesized that the complexity of this bureaucratic structure creates a distance between Writing Lab staff and faculty that can make communication meaningless and work impossible.

Our second assumption builds on the first: the Writing Lab has a tenuous position within the college, and this reputation is inadvertently, but tacitly, communicated to students. We hypothesized that the absence of a clearly defined purpose leaves the Writing Lab with a shaky identity, affecting faculty and student usage patterns as well as student and faculty expectations and satisfaction.

The numerical data that this project generated represents a first attempt to collect data about patterns of usage, other than number of students served by the lab and number of contacts per month. Since there is no prior data on which to base comparisons, the figures here should be considered baseline data--against which the effect of interventions might be judged.

We acknowledge the value of and the need for more precise demographic data and more sophisticated statistical analyses of lab users and non-users. Correlations between lab usage and course grade, lab usage and GPA, lab usage and sex, and lab usage and age would be particularly helpful. Such analyses were not, however, within the scope of this project. Nor do we claim that our use of survey data implies "statistical significance." We do claim that the cited data are valid for defining problem areas for further study. That use is consistent with the purpose of this investigation.

Project Objectives

The four objectives of this project were to:

1. Foster discussion and reflection on the appropriate role and staffing of a college writing center, in particular the role of such a service at RACC.
2. Initiate and nurture dialogue between the college faculty and Writing Lab staff.
3. Identify and articulate problems relating to RACC's Writing Lab.
4. Initiate a process and outline a strategy to address identified problems.

Project Duration

The project was initiated on January 8, 1985 and concluded on September 9, 1985. We met intermittently throughout that period for planning and spent time individually on parts of the project. One of us spent approximately 90-100 hours on the project; the other spent 40 hours.

Project Narrative

1. Data Collection

Our major activities between January and June were concerned with data collection. Early in that period we conducted interviews with the DSP Coordinator, and with the Writing Lab staff. The development of the In-Lab Survey was a direct result of those meetings. We also examined institutional documents describing the purpose, funding, and work of the lab, including DSP reports of usage. During March and April we were observers in the lab itself, noting the numbers of students served, the length of stay, the nature of the students' work, and the nature of the assistance provided by the staff.

The Faculty Survey instrument (See Appendix A.) was developed to explore issues raised by the Writing Lab staff, by student or faculty comments about the lab, and by our own observations. It was distributed early in May to all full-time and part-time teachers. We completed analyses of the data during July and August and plan to discuss our findings with each division at their fall meetings.

A General Student Survey (Appendix A) was developed during May and administered during May and early June. We obtained a sample of students from the Spring, 1985 enrollment of the academic divisions of the college, randomly selected by computer in a variation of the "fish-bowl" method. All

subjects had an equal chance of being selected. We began with a list of 110 names; of those 110 students we contacted 68 through one of their classes. Ten of the distributed forms were not returned by instructors, either because the student was absent or the form was lost (an 85 percent rate of return). We then contacted by telephone 12 additional students from the original list to ask that they participate in the survey. We mailed forms to these 12 students and had 11 of them returned.

That brought the total number of students contacted to 80 and the total surveyed to 69, well within the range of 50-80 subjects judged necessary to represent differences in age, sex, curriculum, quality point average, and full-time or part-time status--factors important for drawing inferences about the relationship between the total student body and the Writing Lab. As with the faculty survey, the one for students was anonymous. We were concerned that students not "self-select" themselves out of the survey because they had never used the lab or had no positive feelings about it. Our records show an 86 percent rate of return on this survey.

Follow-up interviews were conducted during July and August with students who had identified themselves by name and telephone number on the survey form. Twenty-five students agreed to follow-up interviews and we talked with 17 of them. We developed two sets of interview questions: one set for lab users; one for non-users. (See Appendix A.)

The data from the three surveys (Faculty, Student, and In-Lab) were analyzed during August and September. We looked for gaps between the expressed purpose of the lab and its purpose as understood by students and faculty; we looked at teachers' stated referral processes against what students said motivated their use of the lab. And we looked carefully at

the amount and extent of formal writing expected of RACC students versus the amount and source of help they obtained with their writing. A full discussion of the results of our investigation and the conclusions we have drawn follows.

Results and Conclusions of the Study

The purpose of our study was to describe "what is" with respect to the Writing Lab and in so doing to define more clearly what was initially perceived as vague dissatisfaction and confusion about this service. These anecdotal reports, while acting as sparks for our investigation, did not fuel the fire. Nor did they suggest categories for reporting our findings. Instead, the data, often contradictory, seemed to solidify around three aspects of the lab: its task, its referral process, and its relationship to units of the college it is intended to serve. Our findings about the task of the Writing Lab are presented first.

1. The Task

Work not defined cannot be done. The task of the Writing Lab is not currently articulated, which means that work roles and responsibilities go undefined and the college is therefore unable to enlist the resources of many people to accomplish the task that is too big for one person alone.

There is much data to support this conclusion that the Writing Lab has no articulated and feasible task: The only reference in the 1985-86 college catalog to the Writing Lab is its listing as one of several Basic Skills Labs operated by the Developmental Studies Program in its role as a learning resource. The catalog provides this description: "Walk-in labs provide short-term assistance or basic skill development for all levels of Math, English, Reading, and English-as-a-Second Language courses (p. 28)." There is no reference to a Writing Lab, as such. The Special Services Project

Grant which funds the Writing Lab service is only more confusing. The grant proposal describes a laboratory system functioning in concert with Basic Skills courses only, where students take diagnostic tests and receive individual instruction in areas judged deficient. Such a system, grossly inappropriate for addressing the needs of any writer, has never been implemented in the Writing Lab. (See Objective #7, pp. 16-17.) But the most recent institutional document to describe the work of the lab, the Basic Skills Program Review (1984), says clearly in two places that the lab staff are currently limited to helping students only on papers already graded (pages 32 and 46). Such a restriction would seemingly preclude helping students with papers in progress. Yet, the DSP Coordinator reports that a number of teachers regularly rely on the lab to provide all of the guidelines and assistance for preparing written course assignments.

Data from faculty surveys cloud the task issue even further: The most widely-held expectation of the lab among faculty (62%) is that students will receive help with "planning and organizing" a piece of writing. This means that over one-half the full-time teachers at RACC expect students to use the lab as a resource in preparing their written assignments--and not just for revision of graded work. However, only one-third of the faculty expect students to be helped in the lab with other aspects of the writing process--aspects such as choosing a topic, collecting information, or problems with expression.

There is even marked disagreement within divisions about the task of the lab. Five of the nine responding humanities instructors expect students to receive help with expression, "deciding what to say," but one member of that division responds "Never" to that sort of help.

The general student survey data tell us that students are confused about the purpose of the lab, as well. Thirty percent of the non-users "didn't know about it;" twenty-one percent were unclear about the lab's function and procedures; thirteen percent thought it was only for remedial students; and another six percent thought it was only for English students! These same students reported a wide range of required writing for courses during the year. (See Types of Writing Required in Appendix A.)

Interviews with students verified that the great majority of them seek help in the lab for papers-in-progress. Of the seventeen students interviewed, none had used the lab to revise a graded paper. Our observations and the In-Lab Survey supported these findings: students were in the lab to work on papers-in-progress, most frequently to "locate and correct errors."

The lab staff also verify that students most often request help on work in progress, but the staff makes such assistance conditional on the directions of the individual teacher. The staff were particularly sensitive to injunctions communicated from specific teachers, through the Tutor Coordinator, to work only on the graded work of students in their courses. The lab staff further define their task as two pronged: (1) to help a student with problems on a particular assignment and (2) to provide individual instruction of a more general nature to the student willing to return regularly.

Neither staff, coordinators, nor students were able to articulate any more specific definition of purpose or task than the ones offered here. What, then, is the primary task of the Writing Lab? Is it to respond to any student request for help at any point in the writing process? If so, then what principles guide the tutor in his or her intervention? How is

he or she to help? Or, is the task of the lab to give assistance only at the specific direction of teachers? Again, if so, what guides the work of the tutors? We found no guidelines for either task.

Students, faculty, and staff are, therefore, forced to construct their own sense of the lab's task either to allay their anxiety or to fill other individual needs. There are a number of oral traditions that guide the work of the lab staff, but in a complex organization like RACC, with many discrete work groups, oral tradition is an unreliable and inefficient way to define work. The staff merger of Writing and Reading Labs in the fall of 1984 leads us to conclude that the distinct task of the Writing Lab will not become more clear, but rather less so over time. Moreover, task definition is at the heart of dissatisfaction with the Writing Lab and directly affects the referral process and relationships between lab staff, faculty, and students.

2. The Referral Process

Since the purpose of the lab is unclear, teachers don't seem to refer students in any consistent way. No teacher at the college structures lab time as a course requirement. Most (72%) say they seldom or never send copies of writing assignments to lab personnel. Only 6 of our 29 faculty respondents (21%) inform students of lab services when they assign written work. Only 24 percent mention the lab service in their course syllabi. In contrast, the majority (69%) give information about the lab "orally in class" or in conferences (59%). But students interviewed labeled such procedures as vague and not influential.

Furthermore, in spite of frequent complaints among teachers of the poor quality of student writing and comments from the faculty survey that one-half of their students "desperately need" help with written expression,

66 percent of our faculty respondents individually refer no more than 10 students to the lab per term. Only five teachers (17%) refer more than ten students. Teachers seem to view the lab with little confidence as a resource for their students with writing difficulties; consequently, there is much confusion about referral procedures. According to the faculty survey, some teachers believe their division has a procedure for referring students to the Writing Lab, while others within the same division believe no such procedure exists. Five teachers were not sure if their respective division had a procedure.

Disorder within the referral process is seen also in the variety of methods used to direct individual students to the Writing Lab. Sixty-nine percent of responding faculty "urge students to go." Forty-five percent "give them a schedule," and 28 percent use a referral form. Most teachers who refer students use more than one of the stated methods. There is a shotgun quality to these faculty methods which seems to say, "Well, I'll try everything and maybe something will work." Eight teachers say they never refer students to this lab. Several Humanities Division teachers report that they refer students only after written assignments are submitted and graded, while others from the same division refer students for help at all points of the composing process.

Bear in mind, too, that this survey represents and reports the practices of only six part-time instructors. We do not plan to speculate on the behavior of this adjunct teaching group, as so little is documented about their function at the college. We know only that they were a sizable group of 34 during the Spring of 1985. They taught thirty-eight of the 130 academic courses offered that term. We also know that adjunct instructors are traditionally hired to teach introductory courses, so they have

significant contact with first-year students--those just beginning to integrate the real demands of teachers and coursework with their uninformed notions of what college is about.

Students' reluctance to use the lab service makes one question the effectiveness of any of the current referral methods. While lab users and non-users in our General Student Survey reported a startling range of required writing (See "Types of Writing Required," in Appendix A.), only 22 percent of our sample had ever used the lab. Of those users, most (67%) had not used the lab more than once. Only three students in our sample (representing 4 percent of the student body) had used the lab 10 times or more. Users credited instructors as the most frequent source of influence on their decision to seek help in the Writing Lab. (See Sources of Influence in Appendix A.) The In-Lab Survey and user interviews revealed that English instructors were most frequently mentioned as the referring instructor. Twenty percent of these users were self-referred while others credited lab publicity, counselors, or other students with influencing their decision.

Lack of information about the lab also seems to affect student usage. The Student Survey results tell us that 78 percent of RACC students have never used the lab services. Yet, they report the same range and sophistication of required writing as the users: 74 percent had essay tests; 68 percent had term papers; 57 percent had to write book reviews; etc. In spite of this amount of required writing and instructor reports of students' writing deficiencies, 45 percent of the non-users said they "didn't need the services" of the Writing Lab; 30 percent said they were not aware of the service; and 50 percent of all non-users didn't know the location or misunderstood the function of the lab. (See "Why Not?" in Appendix A.)

Many of the non-users may indeed have less need for such support since they cite more sources for help with their writing problems. The non-users reinforce one's notion of the competent student as independent, since they were much more likely to report themselves, reference books, friends, and family members as resources in confronting problems with written assignments than were lab users. (See Sources of Influence, Appendix A.)

Within the Developmental Studies Program and the lab itself the referral process is viewed as problematic. The coordinator and the lab personnel report that students who come "because my teacher said I need help with my writing" come with little insight into either their problems or their instructor's expectations. They refer to such students as "unrealistic, wanting magic solutions," and report that these students do not work productively in the lab.

The lack of agreement within the Humanities Division about the timing and substance of the lab staff's intervention in the writing process leads to real conflict in the delivery of service to referred students. Student A, referred by instructor Number 1, might obtain help on an essay in progress, while student B, taking the same course with a different instructor, is denied help with a similar assignment until after that instructor has graded the paper. We believe this lack of agreement in referral policies is an extension of discord about the purpose of the Writing Lab. Such disagreement puts the lab personnel in the untenable position of implementing contradictory expectations, thereby hampering their ability to work effectively with students; at the same time it places referring faculty in the position of not knowing what instruction students actually receive in the lab. Ultimately, the conflicting expectations place students in the position of having to confront a

baffling process without any assurance that either their writing or their grades will show resulting improvement.

3. Relationship to Faculty and Student Groups

The Writing Lab is an academic support service, theoretically available to all students and faculty, but organizationally isolated from direct, face-to-face contact with these groups. Without formal, written policies and procedures, and without any day-to-day contact, how do faculty communicate their expectations about student writing to the lab staff? How does the staff communicate information about its services to instructors and students? How does the lab staff receive feedback about its efforts to help students? And how satisfied are students with the service? These questions of relationship between groups are critical for any support service which must function in and around other well-defined groups while retaining its own identity. When such a service relies upon other groups to define its task and referral process, as the Writing Lab does, the importance and the difficulty of maintaining relationships across group boundaries multiplies geometrically. To describe these relationships we studied who in the Writing Lab talks with whom, and about what.

Information from the lab personnel again opens up the problem. When asked with whom they interacted in their professional capacities, other than students, the initial response was: "We have no direct communication with teachers." This statement was later slightly qualified, but the weight of it remained. It was a statement supported first by the DSP Coordinator and later by the Faculty Survey. Instructors in the Behavioral Science/Public Services and the Humanities Divisions report that they seldom initiate contact with the lab personnel. For those in Business, Health Services, and Science/Mathematics Divisions the level of contact is lower. In all, 72% of responding faculty reported they seldom or never

initiate such contact. While Humanities and Behavioral Science/Public Services faculty report more frequent student referrals to the lab, like other instructors, they seldom send copies of their syllabi or assignments to the lab. On the other hand, communication from lab personnel to faculty is also minimal. Ninety-three percent of faculty say they seldom or never hear from the lab about student progress, but would like frequent or occasional feedback.

While lab staff contact with faculty is slight, contact with college counselors and other DSP professionals is frequent and intentional. There are regular meetings with the Tutor Coordinator, and direct contact with the counseling staff. All of the current staff cite a counselor or coordinator in the DSP as a primary professional source. When there is a question of policy or procedure with a student, staff go to the DSP Coordinator for clarification. There are no reports of staff approaching an instructor for suggestions about how to help a particular student or how to approach a particular assignment.

The impact of this absence of direct communication between faculty and lab is revealed in the Student Survey. Sixty percent of our sample said that they "talk to the instructor" when faced with problems with a writing assignment. For lab users, the instructor is the second most frequently cited resource; for non-users, the most frequently cited. If students approach instructors with writing problems and instructors refer students, but don't talk with lab personnel, how will the tutor help the student meet the instructor's expectations? Is the tutor to know the conventions that govern the varieties of writing in all academic discipline? We think not. The pattern of insular relationships is striking and significant.

Considering the highly technical and sophisticated range of writing expected of students at RACC, we conclude that the lack of either formal or informal contact with faculty must limit the knowledge of the tutors and hamper their abilities to work with students.

Our survey and interview data further suggest that lab personnel, operating close to--but outside - the academic disciplines, do misjudge teacher expectations and misadvise students as to correct research methods, format, content, or documentation. Lab users that we interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with lab services on this exact point: they reported having a paper positively evaluated by a lab staffer, later to receive a "D" grade on the paper from the course instructor. The large percentage of students who reported, on the In-Lab Survey, working in the lab on "locating and correcting errors" (62%) suggests an explanation for the gap between a student's grade expectations and the actual grade. If students believe this editing task to be at the heart of producing "good writing" and the lab staff reinforces this notion by guiding students most often in that task, the gap becomes less surprising and we see the danger when such a support staff is separated from the larger context.

The communication gulf that exists between lab staff and faculty does not allow, much less encourage, the casual exchange of information so natural and integral a part of professional transactions. Without contact there is no way to provide a context to support staff intervention. Two concerns of the DSP Coordinator further validate faculty, staff, and student data. She cites the insufficient contact between tutors and faculty (particularly adjuncts), and the tutor's lack of information about the classes for which they provide help as significant impediments to their aiding students.

In surveys and interviews the students themselves add another dimension to our description of intergroup relationships. There were many student reports of skillful and sensitive attention to their writing problems by lab staff. The In-lab Surveys were unanimously uncritical--full of praise for the service and the staff. However, since only 24 forms were completed during a period when there were 371 student contacts reported, we hesitate to draw conclusions from this data. There were some complaints registered in interviews and surveys: that the lab was crowded and the atmosphere rushed; that there was annoying smoking; that the tutor did not analyze mistakes thoroughly enough to help students avoid them; that the tutor was not helpful at the point of developing ideas--only in revising and editing.

Such compliments and complaints reflect one level of relationship between lab and students. The data disclose at least one other level: that of awareness. We noted earlier, but repeat here, that 42 percent of the non-users surveyed either didn't know of the lab or didn't know its location. These students, coupled with those who wanted more information about the lab, make up a large segment of the colleges' student body, a segment with far too little information about the Writing Lab (and probably too little confidence) to walk through the lab door and assert their need for help. Direct efforts to introduce lab personnel and services to students seem meager in light of the need reported by faculty.

The quality of isolation in their work and the dearth of frank dialogue with faculty and student groups weigh on the lab personnel. Deprived of positive feedback and protected from complaints, they imagine the worst: "We are seen as villains by some faculty. We go through stages of paranoia. We are in no-man's land--they're shooting at us." Such are

the legitimate fears of helpers when they're not sure who they are to help, or how, or for how long, or whom they should tell about it afterwards. They work in the limbo of intergroup confusion--a world rife with fantasy material for mistaken expectations and poor communication.

Project Recommendations and Next Steps

This report represents an initial step in the feedback of information to project participants. We view our recommendations as the "next steps" of an action research cycle. In part, these recommendations are a guide to addressing the problems we cite with the functioning of the Writing Lab. But we hope that they ultimately address the needs of our students to participate more effectively within and beyond the academic community.

If meaningful dialogue and the work of defining the lab's task is to begin, the need for more information about teacher and student expectations is immediate. We therefore recommend that:

1. Faculty of each academic division review and describe the scope and difficulty of writing requirements for its course offerings. This information should be reported to other academic divisions and to the DSP Tutor Coordinator.
2. Each instructor should be expected to submit copies of syllabi and explanations of all major writing assignments to the lab within the first two weeks of each term.
3. The faculty of each academic division review and clarify its present Writing Lab referral practices. Each division should clarify for itself and for lab staff guidelines for helping students with reports, term papers, case studies, or other forms of academic writing, specifically defining what help they consider appropriate and inappropriate. This information should be

reported to other divisions and to the Tuto Coordinator by December 1, 1985.

4. Adjunct faculty be invited to participate in discussion and decision-making on these matters, and that they also be informed in writing of the outcome.

5. Lab personnel establish an on-going evaluation process for its service. This process should document: the source and nature of referrals, relative number of users by academic division, effect of lab use on paper grade, effect of use on course grade, what students actually do in the lab, etc.--information helpful in generating policy and specifying procedures. This information should be reported to the divisions of the faculty be December 1, 1985.

We further recommend that the college Vice-President of Academic Affairs support this process of resolving the problems of the lab by establishing an ad hoc committee to plan, implement, and evaluate an intervention strategy consistent with the needs of students and the resources of the college. Such a committee should represent each of the groups that relates to the lab and be chaired by the Tutor Coordinator. (This coordinator is in the pivotal position of regulating the communication among faculty, staff, and student groups and should be charged with the job of maintaining and managing boundaries between these groups as well as organizing the functions and structure of the Writing Lab.) The committee should be constituted by January 31, 1986, and should meet to consider possible solutions to the problems cited in this report, particularly to the issue of the lab's task. It should report its progress and decisions to the college community monthly until its dissolution in October, 1986, by which time lab use should be guided by policy and procedures articulated by this committee.

References

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MEMO

READING AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE
P.O. Box 1706, Reading, Pa. 19603

TO: Faculty Colleagues

FROM: Karen Jacobson and Annette Horner

DATE: May 6, 1985

RE: Writing Lab Survey

We are embarked upon a Faculty Development Project to encourage discussion and reflection on the appropriate role of a college writing center. Our focus, naturally, is RACC's Writing Lab.

Since its inception in 1977, the philosophy, policies, and staffing of the lab have changed several times, and we suspect that faculty, student, and counselor expectations have also changed. We are trying to reveal, in a concrete way, the current expectations of all segments of the college who have contact with the lab. If we see discrepancies that might cause confusion or ineffective service to students, we hope to define these areas for further discussion and possible institutional action.

We ask that you help in this process by completing the attached survey form and returning it to Karen Jacobson or Annette Horner by Monday, May 13, 1985. Thank you for your cooperation.

lw

READING AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE WRITING LAB
FACULTY SURVEY

Circle one: 1=Frequently 2=Occasionally 3=Seldom 4=Never

1.	I encourage students in my courses to use the writing lab when they feel they need help with a writing assignment.	1	59% 2	3	38% 4
2.	I direct individual students to the lab.	1	62% 2	3	34% 4
3.	I hear from the writing lab personnel about the progress of my students.	1	30% 2	3	93% 4
4.	I like feedback from the lab personnel about my students.	1	62% 2	3	28% 4
5.	My students report satisfaction with the writing lab services.	1	31% 2	3	62% 4
6.	I initiate contact with the lab personnel.	1	24% 2	3	72% 4
7.	I send copies of my syllabi or writing assignments to the lab personnel.	1	17% 2	3	76% 4

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8. My division has a procedure for referring students to the writing lab.
(Check one) Yes 38% No 41% Not Sure 17%

9. I would like for my division to develop such a procedure. (Check one)
Yes 28% No 7% Not Sure 28%

10. I know the names of the lab personnel. (Check one)
All 14% Some 52% None 31%

11. During a single term, I individually direct to the lab: (Check one)
No Students 24% 1-10 Students 52% 10-20 14% 20+ 3%

12. I inform students about the lab services: (Check any that apply)
In the Syllabus 24% Orally in Class 68% In Conferences 59%
With Each Written Assignment 21% Other 17%

13. In the lab I expect students to receive help with (Check any that apply)
Choosing a Topic 31% Collecting Information 28%
Deciding What to Say 31% Planning and Organizing 62%
Locating and Correcting Errors 59% Other 24%

14. I use these methods to direct individual students to the writing lab:
(Check any that apply)
Referral Form 28% Urging Them to Go 69% Telling Them to Go 45%
Giving Them a Schedule 41% Other 3%

Please circle your division: Bus. Hlth. Ser. BS/PS Hum. Sci. & Math

Are you: Part-time 6 ? Full-time 23 ?

Return to Karen Jacobson or Annette Horner through inter-office mail by May 13.

WRITING LAB PROJECT

GENERAL STUDENT SURVEY

We are working on a project to assess the role of the College Writing Lab in students' academic work. Your answers to the following questions will help us to understand how you currently view the lab and to what extent you rely upon it.

1. What types of writing have your instructors expected of you since you have been at RACC? (Check any that apply.)

Users/Non-Users

12/39	essay tests	8/11	journals
10/36	term papers	11/30	book reports or reviews
5/15	lab reports	7/14	abstracts or research or technical article
8/29	essays	4/17	field notes or case studies
4/11	other: _____		

2. How do you usually handle concerns, questions, or problems about a piece of your writing ? (Check no more than two.)

0/14	I talk to a friend	10/1	I go to the writing lab
2/15	I talk to a classmate	0/0	I get a tutor
9/32	I talk to the course instructor	5/22	I struggle with it myself
0/9	other: _____		

3. Have you ever used RACC's Writing Lab?

15	yes	54	no

If your answer to question #3 was YES, go to Section A.

If your answer to question #3 was NO, go to Section B.

Appendix A
Student Survey Results
Breakout by Percentage

Types of Writing Required in Past Year:

Lab Users	Non-Users	Totals
N = 15/22%	N = 53/78%	
80% Essay Tests (12)	74% Essay Tests (39)	51 = 75%
73% Book Review/Report (11)	57% Book Review/Report (30)	41 = 59%
66% Term Papers (10)	68% Term Papers (36)	40 = 66%
53% Essays (8)	55% Essays (29)	37 = 54%
53% Journals (8)	21% Journals (11)	19 = 28%
46% Abstracts (7)	26% Abstracts (14)	21 = 30%
33% Lab/Technical Reports (5)	28% Lab/Technical Reports (15)	20 = 29%
27% Field Notes/Case Studies (4)	32% Field Notes/Case	21 = 30%
27% Other (4)	21% Other (11)	15 = 22%

Usual Sources of Help:

Users (N = 15)	Non-Users (N = 53)	Usual Sources of Help Totals N = 68
66% Writing Lab (10)		10 = 15%
60% Instructor (9)	60% Instructor (32)	41 = 60%
33% Self (5)	42% Self (22)	27 = 40%
13% Classmate (2)	28% Classmate (15)	17 = 25%
	26% Friend (14)	14 = 21%
	17% *Other (9)	9 = 13%

* Reference Books/Family Members

Appendix A - Student Survey Results (Continued)

Frequency of Use:

1 - 3x = 10 - 67%

4 - 9x = 2 - 13%

10 - x = 3 - 20%

Would Use Again:

YES - 10 = 67%

NO - 5 = 33%

Sources of Influence:

Teacher/Advisor	-	6 = 40%
Myself	-	3 = 20%
Ad for Lab	-	2 = 13%
Counselor	-	2 = 13%
Someone in DSP Office	-	2 = 13%
Another Student	-	2 = 13%

Why Not?	Percent of 53
a. Didn't need it	24 - 45% (used other resources?)
b. Didn't have time	18 - 34%
c. Didn't know of it	16 - 30%
d. Only for remedial students	7 - 13%
e. Didn't know location	6 - 11%
f. Only for English students	3 - 5.6.%
g. *Other	11 - 21%

*Statements reflecting uncertainty about lab's function and procedures.

WRITING LAB SURVEY --SECTION A

Answer the questions in this section if you answered YES to question #3.

1. How many times have you used the writing lab this school year ('84-'85)?

   10 1-3 times 2 4-9 times 1 10-14 times 2 15 or more times

2. Who or what influenced you to go to the lab? (Check no more than two.)

   2 Another student 2 A counselor

   6 A teacher or advisor 2 Someone in the DSP office

   2 An advertisement for the lab 3 Other: _____

3. How satisfied have you been with the help you've received in the lab?

   4 Very Satisfied 8 Satisfied

   2 Unsatisfied 1 Very Unsatisfied

4. Do you think you will use the lab again?

   10 Yes 5 NO

Please add additional comments here or on the back:

** If you are willing to talk more about the Writing Lab or about the kind of support you need with college writing, write you name and phone number below. One of us will contact you.

Your Name _____ Telephone: _____

Thank you very much,

Project Directors:
Karen Jacobson
Annette Horner

May, 1985

WRITING LAB SURVEY -- SECTION B

Answer the questions in this section if you answered NO to question #3.

1. Why have you not used the Writing Lab? (Check no more than three.)

23	I didn't need it	16	I didn't know about it
18	I didn't have the time	6	I didn't know where it was
3	I thought it was only for students in English class	0	I was told by a teacher not to use it
7	I thought it was only for remedial students	0	I had heard negative things about the lab from others
11	Other: _____		

Please add additional comments here or on the back:

** If you are willing to talk more about the Writing Lab or about the kind of support you need with college writing, write you name and phone number below. One of us will contact you.

Your Name _____ Telephone: _____

Thank you very much,

Project Directors:
Karen Jacobson
Annette Horner

May, 1985

WRITING LAB

NON-USERS INTERVIEW

1. What courses have you taken at RACC since last fall? Are you full or part-time? Day or evening?

2. Which of the above courses required you to do any writing? (Use categories from Question #1 and record by letter code.)

3. What was your grade range on:
   -essay tests A/B B/C C/D D/F
   -other writing

4. (If you've had a course that required writing), do you remember any emphasis from the teacher to use the lab? Any explanation of its function?

5. What feedback from teachers about your written assignments?

6. Have you ever felt the need for help with your college writing tasks or wished for specific help? Explain fully.

7. What is your Cum. average?

8. Did a teacher or counselor ever recommend that you go to the lab? (If yes,) then what kept you from going?)

9. (If not yet answered, ask directly to those with writing-heavy courses): Why haven't you used the lab? On what basis do you decide it is not for you?

10. What do you think the purpose of the Writing Lab is?

WRITING LAB

STUDENT INTERVIEW

LAB USERS

1. What courses have you taken at RACC since last fall (9/84)? Are you full or part-time? Day or evening?

2. Which of these courses required you to do any writing? (Use categories from Question #1 on survey and record by letter code.)

3. What courses were you taking when you used the lab? Did you go for a particular course? A particular assignment? What convinced you to go?

4. (If student went for a particular course)... Did you go at your teacher's urging or encouragement? Describe.

5. Do you remember what sort of help you were hoping for/expecting when you visited the lab?

6. What did you actually do there? What sort of information or help did the staff person provide?

7. Was that effective with you? How so? (Probes: complete an assignment? Pass the course? Grade on paper? Other feedback from teacher?)

8. What is your usual grade range on:

-essay tests	A/B	B/C	C/D	D/F
-other writing				

9. What is you Cum. average?

10. What would you like to see done differently in the lab? Is their anything you didn't like about your experience in the lab?

11. Are there aspects of your writing that you need help with that you feel the lab unable to provide?

12. Is there anything else you would like to say about the lab or tell me?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Time: _____

Date: _____

STUDENT SURVEY OF WRITING LAB

A survey is being conducted to find out how students feel about the services of the Reading/Writing Lab. You could help us by answering the questions listed below. Your answers are important to us and will be strictly confidential.

1. How often do you come to the Reading/Writing Lab? (Check one)

|2| This is my first visit |5| Once a week |12| 2-3 times a week |__| Once a month |5| Other

2. Who suggested you get help from the Reading/Writing Lab? (Check one)

|14| I decided on my own that I needed help. |9| A teacher recommended that I come. |5| A counselor referred me.

_____ (Teacher's name) _____ (Counselor's name)

3. What kind of writing did you come to work on today? (Check one)

|18| A paper for a course 11- English (Course Name) |4| No particular paper. I just want to improve my writing |2| Some writing I'm doing for personal reasons |2| Essay exam writing

4. What did you work on today? (Check more than one if appropriate)

|__| Choosing a topic |1| Deciding what to say |6| Expressing my ideas in writing |6| Organizing my ideas |15| Locating and and correcting errors

5. How helpful did you find today's visit? (Check one)

|16| Very Helpful |7| Quite Helpful |1| A little helpful |__| Not at all helpful

6. Do you think you'll come back to the Reading/Writing Lab? (Check one)

|23| Yes |__| No _____ (Please explain briefly)

7. Listed below are some characteristics of the Writing Lab Services that we would like you to rate. Please circle only one response for each characteristic.

	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Very Unsatisfactory
A. The attitude and manner of the tutor	1/21	2/2	3	4
B. The kind of help I was given	1/16	2/10	3	4
C. The amount of time the tutor worked with me	1/15	2/9	3	4
D. The books or material I was given to use	1/12	2/6	3/1	4 NA - 4
E. The amount of time I had to wait before I received help	1/15	2/7	3/3	4
F. The working conditions (space, noise, lighting, room temperature)	1/18	2/8	3/1	4/1

Comments: _____ _____

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